1: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945) 1949 ND12 Nahane ND12

SETTING

THE KASKA AREA

THE fifteen thousand square miles constituting the intermontane region occupied by the Kaska Indians west of the Rocky Mountains are divided between uninhabited mountainous terrain visited for hunting and trapping, and wide, rolling river valleys in which a sparsely distributed population carries on the bulk of its activities. Running away from these river valleys the country becomes increasingly hilly as it proceeds toward the eastern Rocky Mountains and the western Cordillera (Fig. 1). North of Frances Lake and south of Dease Lake these mountain systems come close together to provide the natural frontiers of the Kaska area. About halfway up Dease River from Lower Post, an offshoot of the Cordillera—the Cassiar Mountains—transects the country from northwest to southeast. Other minor ranges, including the Simpson Mountains, traverse the region between Frances Lake, on the north, and the Liard River, on the south.

The mountains provide sources for the numerous rivers and creeks that drain the country. All of these waters flow into the Liard River, which empties into the Mackenzie, and, eventually, reach the Arctic Ocean. The rivers are generally fast and shallow and marked by many sloughs. Their crooked courses are interrupted by numerous places where the current is swift and turbulent and by several narrow canyons which are impassable. A number of small lakes are also scattered throughout the area.

The climate of the country alternates between hot summer days with cool evenings, and cold winters in which the temperature hovers around twenty degrees below zero and even reaches sixty or seventy degrees below. Frosts set in around the middle of August and by early September the few deciduous trees have lost their color. Several weeks of intermittent rainfall can be expected after the first of September. When this period ends, the willows and poplars are free of leaves. By late October the rivers run with slush, small lakes and sloughs are frozen, and ice is beginning to form along the shores of the larger streams. Dry snow falls from the middle of October. After the middle of November even the larger rivers are covered with ice except for a few stretches of swift, open water. Winter has set in. In the Upper Liard area snow reaches a depth of fifteen inches by Christmas and three or four feet by the end of January. Around the beginning of March the dry, powdery snow of winter becomes moist under the warmer sun and the prevailing westerly wind (the Chinook), and the surface of the snow begins to form a thick, heavy crust. In April the river ice begins to break and the streams run with ice floes. The northern latitude of the area is associated with long days in summer. In late June and early July the sun rises at about 2:30 A.M. and sets about 10:30 P.M. Complete darkness is absent during this period. In winter long nights are the rule, the sun rising about 9:30 A.M. in December and setting at about 3:00 P.M. Because of its low position on the southern horizon, however, the winter sun is not warming.

The country, part of the circumpolar boreal forest belt, is marked by a predominance of coniferous flora. The principal species include red and black spruce and jack-pine; balsam

Habitat

The Tahltan claim very considerable area of country in the Cassiar district of British Columbia, the southern extremity of their territories touching latitude 56 and the northern extremity latitude 60. East and west their country extends from the Cascade to the Cassiar Range. The upper Stikine may be called the center of their territory. They control all the drainage basin of this river and only in a few places do they extend beyond to some of the neighboring feeders of the waters of the Taku, Nass, Skeena, Mackenzie and Yukon Rivers. 131

Characteristics of the Country

The region occupied by the Tahltan is of a semi-mountainous and semi-forested character. There are extensive areas of plateau and rolling country lightly timbered or for the most part open. As the timber line is low in this latitude and much of the country is equal in elevation to or above the timber line a great deal of country (all the higher parts) is almost devoid of timber. The lower plateaux and valleys are generally well timbered with trees of medium and small size - although nowhere growing thickly as on the Coast, nor is there anywhere much under brush as in the latter region. Many of the upper valleys are grassy or mossy in character and have very little timber. Moss is plentiful both in the open country and in the forests, and muskegs are often to be met with. The slopes of the hills and mountains, especially in the more easterly and westerly parts of the country, are often steep and rocky. The country as a whole shows much signs of erosion and in some places its nature is volcanic. The valley of the Stikine River, commencing immediately east of the Cascades for a distance of some forty miles, is drier than the rest of the country and resembles a good deal in appearance and flora some valleys further south in the Dry Belt of British Columbia. /To the/ west, in the Cascade or Coast mountains, where the Stikine and other streams pierce the range, the country assumes a different appearance, becoming very mountainous and rocky; glaciers and snow fields abound, and the lower valleys become gorge-like in character, with heavy timber and underbrush where the soil is not too rocky. Here the climate becomes cooler, and proceeding westwards the rainfall and snow fall become heavier and heavier. 133 137 133 134 [137] 132

132 However, very little of the Tahltan country lies within this wet belt. In the valley of the Lower Stikine the annual precipitation is estimated to be 100 inches or over, whilst in most parts of the Interior it probably does not exceed 15 to 25 inches. The southern part of the Tahltan country towards and around the head /waters/ of the Nass has more rainfall and snow fall than the northern and central parts and consequently this part of the country is on the whole more timbered. [137]

The extremes of temperature are great. It seems the greatest summer heat in the valleys is from 85 to 95F in different localities, depending a good deal on altitude, and in winter the greatest cold from 45 to 60 below zero F.

137 The principal trees are black pine, spruce (of two or three kinds,) balsam, willow, birch, alder and aspen. Hemlock, balsam, cedar and poplar are common in the valleys of the Cascades. Larch, Douglas fir and several kinds of pine so common in the Southern Interior are entirely wanting. Larch of some kind however is reported in certain localities further east in the Kaska country and elsewhere beyond the boundaries of the Tahltan, and cypress is reported to occur in the valley of the Iskut. (For a further description of the characteristics of the Tahltan country see Emmons pp. 9-11).

Tribal Boundaries

131 619 I spent considerable time with a number of informants trying to locate as correctly as possible the boundaries or approximate boundaries of the territories claimed by the Tahltan. Generally speaking, the Tahltan boundary on the west follows the axis of the Cascade or Coast Range, but the central part of the range is seldom penetrated except at a few points, as it is practically nothing but a sea of high rocky peaks and glaciers almost devoid of life. The lower eastern part of the range next /to/ the Interior plateau is the only portion really used by the Tahltan. There is a break in the general western boundary line of the Tahltan in the neighborhood of the Iskut and Stikine Rivers. Here the Tlingit claimed the river valleys on the Iskut to almost through the Cascade range, and on the Stikine to well beyond the range into the Interior to a point at least about or a little above Glenora, according to some informants,

131 619 648

6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

at Pine Rapids. Above McDame the river passes west of the Horseranch Mountains, a spur of the Cassiar Range. The more rugged features of the district are somewhat softened at the confluence of the Dease and Liard rivers, the site of Lower Post. It is this region, actually extending westward from Smith River to Watson Lake, which Williams has described as "a rolling plateau deeply covered with sand and gravel, and varied by low rounded hills and deep, well forested stream valleys."[4] Bisecting the Cassiar from north to south is the so-called Rocky Mountain Trench, one of the proposed routes for the Alaska Highway that has also been surveyed from Prince George to Watson Lake for a railroad. The survey line can still be followed and crosses the Alaska Highway a few hundred feet east of Lower Post.[5]

The Cassiar is drained by several large rivers including, from west to east, the Frances, Dease, Hyland, Kechika (Muddy), Coal, Rock, and Smith. The lower reaches of the Kechika or Muddy River are sometimes referred to as the Turnagain or Black River. All of these run into the easterly flowing Liard, which in turn enters the Mackenzie at Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, whose waters finally reach the Arctic Ocean. In spring and early summer the streams are swift and deep. Toward autumn the water level recedes considerably but the numerous rapids always render river navigation difficult and sometimes hazardous. "Rising in the elevated country west of the Rocky Mountains, the Liard falls rapidly toward the east, the difference in elevation between the mouth of the Dease and the Mackenzie amounting to nearly 1,650 feet, and is characterized nearly everywhere by impetuous currents, by dangerous rapids and narrow whirlpool cañons."[6] About 50 miles below Lower Post is Hell's Gate, the most famous of the Liard's rapids. Here the river cuts its torturous route through the barrier of the Rockies. The spring break-up of the frozen Liard is reported to be particularly spectacular in this canyon where huge slabs of ice pile up with pressure increasing behind them until, with a terrific roar that can be heard for miles, the mass gives way and charges through the narrow, cavelike opening. The difficulties associated with water transportation up the Liard from Fort Simpson were largely responsible for the abandonment, in 1865, of Fort Halkett, the Hudson's Bay Company post at the confluence of the Liard and Smith rivers (Fig. 2). Since that date the principal means of access to the Cassiar has been from the south, travelers, among whom gold seekers occupied a prominent place, journeying up the Stikine River from Wrangell, Alaska, to Telegraph Creek, B. C. From here they crossed the height of land to reach the foot of Dease Lake, 200 miles south of Lower Post. By 1946 this route was rapidly falling into abeyance as the Alaska Highway provided a new and modern means of access.

The climate of the intermontane Cassiar is seasonally variable. In summer, as elsewhere in the northern forest, the days are hot and temperatures reach 90 degrees in the

[4] Williams, *Geological Reconnaissance along the Alaska Highway from Fort Nelson, British Columbia, to Watson Lake, Yukon* (1944), 2. See also McConnell, *Report on an Exploration in the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins* (1890), 80.

[5] In 1950 the New York newspapers reported fresh talk of a proposed railroad to extend from Prince George to Fairbanks, Alaska, passing through Lower Post.

[6] McConnell, *Report on an Exploration in the Yukon and Mackenzie Basins* (1890), 34D.

6: Honigmann E-5 (1943-1945)1954 ND12 Nahane ND12

sun. With the onset of evening the heat declines so that the nights are cool. Frosts be- 132
gin in August. In winter periods of extreme cold occur but the season is relatively wind-
less, a condition that helps to make the low temperatures bearable. In 1943–44 and
again in January, 1947, the mercury is said to have approached 70 degrees below zero
Fahrenheit. The winter of 1944–45 was described as relatively mild, the coldest day
being about 55 degrees below zero.[7] The winter climate is greatly influenced by the
Polar Continental air masses of the interior. When these cross the eastern mountains
they bring the particular quality of cold which Indians describe as coming from the
east or northeast. Snowfall is apt to be heavy, beginning in late September and remain-
ing in the mountains until late June.

136 Like other parts of the North American taiga, the Cassiar remains well stocked with
137 game and fur bearers. The coniferous forest of spruce and jackpine, interspersed with
dense clumps of willow, quaking aspen,[8] birch, and cottonwood (*liard*), proves hospitable
to the fox, ground hog, gopher (marmot), lynx, mink, marten, otter, weasel, porcupine,
muskrat, rabbit, red squirrel, wolf, coyote, mouse, and beaver. Amid the spruces the
ground is covered with a luxuriant blanket of sphagnum moss attractive to caribou.
Snakes are apparently absent, though not unfamiliar to the Indians. Patches of rasp-
berry, saskatoon, strawberry, cranberries (low and high bush), and soap berry are in-
viting to grizzly, brown, and black bears. Jenness reports native traditions of buffalo
136 having been plentiful in the Kaska country during the precontact period.[9] Is he per-
haps influenced by Indian tales of people running across huge "elephant" bones and
teeth, probably belonging to some prehistoric species of dinosaur?[10] The available evi-
dence indicates the range of wood buffalo to have been restricted to the east of the Fort
Nelson River.[11] Various authors as well as local Indians agree that at some time in the
past moose were lacking in the country. According to Pike, "twenty-five years ago there
were few moose along the Liard, and the animal was unknown to the Indians hunting
to the westward of Dease Lake. Then there began to be frequent rumours of a big
track seen in the snow, and momentary glimpses of a beast whose size varied according
to the fancy of the startled hunter. Then a young brave stood face to face with a moose
and slew it; and the Cascas discovered that a new animal . . . had invaded their coun-
try."[12] George Adsit, a now deceased, long-term resident of the Cassiar, told the writer

[7] Personal communication. According to Pike, "the winters in the Cassiar are mild in comparison to the climate in the same latitude to the eastward of the Rockies, the warm Chinook winds from the Pacific penetrate the coast ranges, modifying the intensity of the cold to such an extent that there is usually a thaw with rainfall during some part of the winter." (Pike, *Through the Subarctic Forest* [1896], 99–100.) According to information personally received from George Adsit, long-term Cassiar resident, the Chinook does not blow until April and therefore has no effect on winter temperatures.

[8] This species of tree is especially found as a second growth in burned areas, where the rose bay or fireweed also flourishes. For an interesting account of the latter plant, lately returned to London, England, after 300 years, see Vadeboncoeur, *Flower of the Blitz* (1946).

[9] Jenness, *Indians of Canada* (1932), 397.

[10] Sternberg, *Canadian Dinosaurs* (1945).

[11] Allen, *American Bisons* (1876).

[12] Pike, *Through the Subarctic Forest* (1896), 89. Williams also reports the former absence of moose in the Cassiar in his *Game Trails in British Columbia* (1925), 256.